

THE TIME IS NOW! Speaking Out on Racism

June 8, 2020



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I was brought up in a community and environment where it is taboo to make references about the color of our skin. This was, I guess, our way of saying, that it really doesn't matter. I'm not sure if it was more my family or if it's because Britain is such a melting pot, but on the whole, unless we become close enough to a person to talk about ethnic differences or similarities, we just didn't talk about it. That would change after moving Japan, as the Japanese will let you know that you are different at pretty much every opportunity, but we'll get to that later.

Over the last few weeks, following the murder of George Floyd, I have watched news programs and been deeply moved by some of the scenes and videos coming out of the United States, and at the same time, been deeply frustrated by the lack of change up to now. I don't talk politics, as who we support and who we don't support is a very touchy subject, so while trying to avoid offending anyone on that front, I feel that I need to speak out about a number of things that are laying heavily on my mind right now.

Like a few others that I've heard say this over the last few days, I was going to just keep my thoughts to myself, but then I did something that I do every few days, which is to recall one of the biggest regrets of my life, and realized that saying nothing can be as harmful as being racist. I don't have a racist bone or even cell in my body, and I was shocked in my youth to learn that a few people that I thought were friends were racist. My closest friends were like me, no prejudice or racism ever came into our conversation, and those more distant acquaintances that showed racist tendencies did not stay friends.

This story comes with an apology. An apology to a beautiful young black girl named Epee (not sure if I spelled that right) that used to hang out with us in my mid-teens. She was quiet, and had a beautiful laugh, and is a part of many of my memories, but one of the last times I

saw her, not surprisingly, became literally one of the biggest regrets of my life.

We'd been hanging out in the local park near the swimming pool, as we often did, and heard that a friend was having a party nearby, so we all walked over there together. As our group walked into his hallway and the front door closed, I heard him say that he was having no black girls in his house. I saw disappointment and sadness of Epee's face that I'll never forget, but the deeper regret is that we stayed, and let that young girl walk home alone.

I can't imagine how painful that must have been for Epee, and of course, to this day, I regret the fact that we didn't leave with her. If that happened now, I know that I'd have the wherewithal to turn around and walk out, but in my mid-teens, when partying was more important, I didn't, and I'll regret that for the rest of my life.

I've spent hours online over the years searching for Epee to apologize, but I've never found her. If anyone knows her, please let her know about this post. She'll have left high-school in Long Eaton, Nottingham, England in 1984, a year after I left high-school. If you ever find this Epee know that I'm sorry. What we did was unforgivable. If possible, drop me a line, so that I can let you know personally.

Silence Sends the Wrong Message

I'm relaying this story today because this led to the realization this morning that staying silent on the issue of racism is not acceptable. I may not be able to do anything directly to help, but I cannot just sit back and say nothing, because that allows those who may have other views to include me in their circles, and that party back in 84 was the first and last time I'll allow that to happen.

I need everyone that listens to this podcast or reads the blog to know that I support any peaceful protests against racism, and regardless of the color of your skin, if anyone wants to come onto the show to speak out on these issues, let me know. I do not want to hear from racists or anyone that would use this vehicle to spread hate, and should anyone I speak to turn the conversation that way, the call will be immediately terminated and nothing will be shared.

Hopefully only a very small number of people, but I know that there will be some people that follow my work that have different views. If that's the case, you will need to either come to terms with the fact that I deplore racism of any kind, and if you can't handle that, you can walk away. I will not tolerate racism or white supremacy comments, so don't leave any. If our spam filters don't keep you out, know that your comments will be deleted, and if I get many, I'll stop comments on this post. I will not let hate in because there is no hate here to help you to propagate your own.

My Own Experiences in Japan

I'd like to relay a few other stories about my own life here in Japan that have been a bit of an eye-opener over the years. Growing up as a white person in England doesn't expose you to much racial prejudice. Even in Japan, it does not expose me to prejudice as much as what I've heard from Indian and black friends over here, but there is a certain amount of prejudice that I've dealt with over the years that helps me to feel more grateful for the way I was raised, without prejudice or racist feelings.

There will always be looks and even today, after living here in Japan for 29 years at this point, I can sometimes sit on a crowded train with people standing, and a free seat next to me, because some people would prefer to stand than sit next to the foreigner. That annoys me, but it's not aggressive, so I

can live with it. I recall the first time I tried to rent an apartment in Fukushima back in 1994 and was told by the real estate agent that they had nothing to rent in the area I was pointing to on the map. The next area also came up blank, and the next, until I'd pointed to the whole city, and was told that they didn't have a single apartment to rent. Realizing that they were saying that they would not rent anything to me, I stormed out, stringing together as many fowl Japanese words that I could muster.

I'd struggle when renting apartments on two other occasions, and recall the anger I felt when I moved back to Japan after a short stint in England until 2000. I had arranged our new apartment in Tokyo remotely and was due to go and sign the contracts the day after I arrived back and called the agency from the airport as requested, and was asked a question that made my blood boil. The agent asked where I was from, and I replied that I was from England, and pointed out that they already knew that. Embarrassed the young girl on the phone said that she was sorry to have to ask, but explained that she needed to know my ethnicity. I told her that I was caucasian, and asked why she was asking. Continuing in her embarrassed tone, she explained that the owner of the apartment would not allow me to live there if I was black.

I immediately thought of Epee, and quickly expanded that to every black person on the planet that experienced this kind of prejudice their entire lives, and felt angry that there were some people in Japan, a country that I love so much, that harbor these kind of feelings, and I was shocked that in Japanese society, you can even ask that question. I'm sure that in most countries I could be arrested for asking that question, and rightly so. I was also annoyed with myself because I had no choice at this point, with all of my stuff from England arriving in a few days, but to continue with the contract and I ended up living in that racists apartment for ten years.

Knowing how difficult it is to rent a place here, I had no choice, but both my wife and I were appalled by the question, and never forgave the owner for it. We'd talk about that experience every time the owner annoyed us, by coming to our door to ask if it was me that had put the wrong type of garbage out, for example. He'd assume that anything that required more than a smidgeon of understanding of Japanese or the Japanese culture was probably me, and that annoyed the hell out of me. After a number of such accusations, I told him that I lived and worked in Japanese, and had no problem understanding simple garbage disposal rules and that I'd like him to stop coming to me when someone messes up, and to his credit, he did stop, in the most part.

The apartment that I moved to ten years ago did not have any similar questions, which was refreshing, but it was around the time that I moved here in 2010 that I had a conversation with an Indian friend and learned that as a non-white foreigner here, he was discriminated against much more frequently than I had ever been, which was a bit of a shock. But, I need you to know that although Japan has its problems, in general, they are not aggressively racist, and most people point out differences out of curiosity and in fun, rather than in malice. The Japanese can behave a little awkwardly even around white foreigners, although those barriers are easily broken down by a good understanding of the language.

I should add that I am actually now a Japanese citizen. I naturalized in 2010 and now need a visa when I visit the UK. I no longer own a British passport, so please understand that despite the few shortcomings that Japan has, I love this country and the Japanese people so much that I became one. Also, I need to say that I'm relaying these stories to let you know that I have experienced some racial prejudice, but I realize that my experiences are nothing compared to the oppression and racism that many black people face every day.

It doesn't even come close.

I wanted to relay one last story that touched me recently, to help you understand that the Japanese are compassionate and are also behind the black community in your fight to make the world a better, fairer place. We watched Curtis Hayes tell a 16-year-old protester that he has to come up with a better way to protest, because he has been doing it the same way for years, and nothing has changed. It is a powerful message, from people that live with these struggles every day, and my Japanese wife, having just gotten out of the shower, turned off her hair-dryer to watch this.

As the clip drew to an end, and I was feeling emotional, both sad with the situation, and angry that nothing has changed, I turned to my wife to find her crying. She was crying partly because of the same feelings that I had, and was moved by powerful and deep messages, but also, she told me, by the fact that people like Curtis Hayes still had the strength to protest despite it never leading to any real change, so far.

But with a video camera in pretty much every pocket now, these messages are not lost to the moment. It's no longer just the leaders such as Martin Luther King that make global news. Everyone has a voice now, and we both hope and pray that these will be the protests that finally lead to change. Everyone is equal. We all deserve to be treated with respect and receive equal opportunities. Things need to change, and the time is NOW.

This video of the two boys has to be our future, and it starts today.





Finally, I'd like to add a verbal credit for the photo that I used as the featured photo for this post. It was shot by Johnny Silvercloud represented by Shutterstock. It's an amazing photo with a powerful message. As I searched through the library for an image, and saw the message on the t-shirt, "Silence is Betrayal" I knew straight away that this was the shot. Thanks Johnny!

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MARTIN BAILEY PHOTOGRAPHY K.K.

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